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## **Vulnerable neighbourhoods in Belgium, Germany and Denmark: the link between national and local politics**

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# *Kwetsbare wijken in België, Duitsland en Denemarken*

WISSELWERKING TUSSEN  
LANDELIJK EN LOKAAL BELEID

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# Summary

## *Kwetsbare wijken in België, Duitsland en Denemarken*

WISSELWERKING TUSSEN LANDELIJK EN LOKAAL BELEID

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Occasion

The Dutch government wishes to gain more insight into the measures taken in the countries surrounding us that face a comparable integration challenge in bringing about an improvement of the safety and liveability in vulnerable neighbourhoods. Such measures are not easily compared. Each country has its own administrative structure and culture, each municipality has its own possibilities, issues and challenges. This applies to the various neighbourhoods in cities as well.

The present quick scan brings out the different measures taken in recent years in six vulnerable neighbourhoods in surrounding countries with respect to liveability, integration and social safety. We place these measures in their administrative context and relate them to what is known about the problems in the neighbourhoods. It is an exploration into the policies used in the six neighbourhoods and the experiences thus gained.

The goal of this exploration is to find out what the Dutch can learn from the countries surrounding us when it comes to dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods with regard to the domains of safety, liveability, and integration and society.

## 1.2 Approach

We have selected six neighbourhoods in Belgium, Germany and Denmark to collect the experiences gained there. Our choice was not based on specific measures, characteristics or issues; on the contrary, they were to surface during the exploration. The selection came about in consultation with the client, whereby it was important to include a neigh-

bourhood in the capital and a neighbourhood in another city. The neighbourhoods also needed to be known for an existing integration problem.

In Denmark, we have held up the experiences in the neighbourhoods Gellerup in Aarhus and Tingbjerg in Copenhagen against the light. In Germany, we have selected the neighbourhoods Gropiusstadt in NeuKölln, Berlin, and Marxloh in Duisburg, in North Rhine-Westphalia. In Belgium, we have chosen the Brussels neighbourhood of Molenbeek and several neighbourhoods in the municipality of Mechelen.

The following questions were guiding in the collection of information:

1. Which national policies are in place in Belgium, Germany and Denmark to deal with vulnerable neighbourhoods, what are the goals, and which accompanying national policy measures have been taken regarding this theme?
2. How is the (national) policy for vulnerable neighbourhoods designed at the municipal level in Belgium, Germany and Denmark, respectively? Which approaches or measures have been the result of the (national) policy and in which ways has the national policy in the three countries influenced policy at the municipal level?
3. At the different administrative levels, what are the relevant contextual factors for the policy aimed at dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods in Belgium, Germany and Denmark, respectively?
4. To what extent have the national and municipal policies for dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods implemented in Belgium, Germany and Denmark, respectively, contributed to the realization of the formulated national policy goals?
5. What can the Dutch learn from the Belgian, German and Danish policies for dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods in the domains of safety, liveability, and integration and society?

For each country, we have followed the locally applicable definitions and interpretations of concepts such as ‘vulnerable neighbourhoods.’ We have looked, - even when a policy regarding vulnerable neighbourhoods was lacking -, at the domains of safety, liveability, and integration and society. This policy is part of the national and municipal context of policies regarding vulnerable neighbourhoods.

In cooperation with local partners, we have unearthed the available documentation and supplemented it with eight to ten interviews for each country with people involved and academics. This effort does not suffice to answer all research questions exhaustively, which would, moreover, result in an unreadable compilation. This study presents a sound overview of the differences, yet for more precision we refer to the sources we have collected. Our work method is described in more detail in appendix 1.

### 1.3 Reading guide

In the following, we will describe the experiences in Belgium, Germany and Denmark, respectively. We will identify policies aimed at dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods and relevant contextual factors at different administrative levels, to understand these policies in a comprehensive way. We will also look at what is known about the realization of policy goals and at the experiences of interlocutors.

Our reports on countries will be preceded by a discussion per country of the common thread in the approach regarding vulnerable neighbourhoods. This discussion will specifically include the interaction between national and local policies. This chapter will contain the most important conclusions of this exploration.

# 2 Lessons from Belgium, Germany and Denmark

## 2.1 Introduction

In the descriptions of the approaches to vulnerable neighbourhoods in Belgium, Germany and Denmark, we have found a great number of measures. These measures are diverse and as such constitute a rich source of examples that may serve as an inspiration for the Dutch approach. Notable is that each country has adopted an example from the Netherlands. The approach used in the Dutch Bijlmermeer, for instance, served as a model in Aarhus, while the concept of 'neighbourhood mothers' is used in Berlin.

It seems that the measures can only be really understood and evaluated for their effectiveness in their own context. To begin with, research into the effectiveness of an overall approach is very rare. The nature of the problems differs for each neighbourhood, the cohesion between the different measures is strong, the influence of new events is ever present, and effects can only be looked at in the long term. These are unfavourable conditions for effectiveness research.

Below, we will start by integrally identifying the main outline of the measures per country. We will then examine the interaction between national and local policies regarding vulnerable neighbourhoods in an overview of the countries.

## 2.2 Belgian policy regarding vulnerable neighbourhoods

Neither Flemish regional policy nor Belgian federal policy includes a policy specifically aimed at dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Regarding the theme of integration and society and the theme of liveability, the Flemish government steers by means of subsidy relations through sectoral lines. Often, the subsidies directly reach the practice that receives resources to set up and execute projects, which results in the side-by-side existence of different projects at the local level. Municipalities are free to either forge their own integral approach or let the projects just do their work side by side. In this respect, we see a clear difference between the two case municipalities. While the municipality of Mechelen tries to fund projects that fit in with their vision of a future inclusive and liveable city through the different sectoral subsidies, most of the projects in Molenbeek take place separately.

The safety theme falls under the responsibility of the federal government. Guiding are the Framework Document Integral Safety and an existing subsidy relation between the federal government and municipalities. To be granted a subsidy for their local safety policy, municipalities are required to set up their safety plans in such a way that they fit in with the priorities in the Framework Document. These priorities have been broadly formulated, which gives the municipalities a lot of freedom while formulating and implementing their safety policy. In this way, the municipalities determine whether and to what extent they pursue a 'genuinely' integral safety policy in which a preventative and a repressive approach are dovetailed. In the cases of Mechelen and Molenbeek, those involved conclude that dovetailing a preventative and a repressive approach constitutes an important success factor in dealing with (the safety in) vulnerable neighbourhoods.

## 2.3 German policy for dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods

Germany knows several subsidy programmes (*Stadtebauförderprogrammen*), aimed at improving the liveability in the cities. One of these programmes, *Soziale Stadt*, focuses specifically on disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The federal republic pays a third of the costs, which amounts to 190 million euro annually. It expects that the other administrative levels contribute an equal amount. The programmes initiated through federal policy reach the individual neighbourhoods through the federal states and municipalities. The federal states are free to set their own priorities, while the municipalities are free to develop their own specific, integral plans. Within the *Soziale Stadt* programme the federal states determine, for instance, that the projects should be mainly physical or should address social problems.

For the same vulnerable neighbourhoods, several other subsidy programmes are available at the federal level as well. Similar to the *Soziale Stadt*, these are given substance in each federal state and municipality in different ways. They focus on integration, youth and employment, or physical interventions in the neighbourhood.

The main instruments of the *Soziale Stadt* programme are the *Quarter Management* and the biennial integral plan development. The Quarter Management staff knows what goes on in the neighbourhood and is the lynchpin between inhabitants and officials, projects and society. They apply for subsidies from the different programmes available. According to people involved, the present *Soziale Stadt* programme and the other social programmes used offer only partial solutions for the problems in the neighbourhoods. In Gropiusstadt, for instance, *Soziale Stadt* does provide the connections between schools, which enables them to discuss problems, exchange experiences and help one

another at a practical level. Yet, this effort does not result in a quick disappearance of the shortage of teachers assigned to helping children master German who do not speak the language at home. This concerns education policy at the federal level, which does not pay any special attention to disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Our interlocutors argue that, as long as the rents stay low in Marxloh and Gropiusstadt, new groups will keep coming to these neighbourhoods, since they fulfil the role of 'arrival neighbourhood' for immigrants. It is the first step taken in Germany, from where they themselves or later generations ideally will step up to other neighbourhoods after a successful educational or working career. As various interlocutors emphasize, to achieve this, it is important for Germany to invest far more in both education, to realize and use the potential of newcomers, and the enforcement of the German rule of law.

According to some of our interlocutors, in its implementation a programme such as *Soziale Stadt* can be designed more efficiently. As points of improvement, they identify an improved cooperation between (governmental) bodies, more transparency or a merging of subsidy programmes, lowering the application thresholds and granting trust and decision-making power to the operational level.

## 2.4 Danish policy for dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods

In Denmark, the policy for (social) safety, liveability, and integration and society has been getting ever more intertwined since 2010. In June 2018, the national Ghetto legislation has come into force. It is a top-down national policy for vulnerable neighbourhoods, consisting of five selected themes:

- The physical demolition and restructuring of vulnerable neighbourhoods.
- A firmer control of newcomers with a migrant background in vulnerable neighbourhoods.
- Strengthened police efforts and higher penalties in order to fight crime and increase safety.
- The promotion of a good start for children and youth.
- The commitment of the government to goals for combating parallel societies.

Under these 5 themes fall 22 criteria, of which some are binding for a neighbourhood to get taken off the list of 'hard ghettos' or 'ghettos'. The use of the term 'ghetto' was met with much criticism during its introduction in 2010, in particular because such terminology may also lead to the stigmatisation of neighbourhoods. Another of the predicted consequences was that, eventually, nobody would want to live in a designated ghetto. Since 2018, our interlocutors have noted a certain internalisation of the term. The stigmatising term still makes it difficult, however, to focus the spotlight on positive changes in such a neighbourhood.

When we look closer at the transmission of national policy into local policy, we see that, since November 2018, it has become harder for local officials to bend the national policy to their needs. Until June 2018, a somewhat 'wayward', local form of the national policy could be seen at the municipal level in Copenhagen. According to those involved, the Ghetto legislation has many implications for the domains of physical and social liveability, integration and (social) safety. On the one hand, the quota for the different policy domains generate an effective measurability of goals and results. The implementation of the policy is very action-oriented; officials and professionals in the neighbourhood can no longer hide behind vague results. Local officials and other professionals of, for instance, housing corporations, or in education and temporary employment agencies, are also forced to cooperate more intensively to get a particular neighbourhood off

the Ghetto list, or to prevent a particular neighbourhood from becoming marked as a ghetto.

On the other hand, the function of the quota defeats their purpose, according to our interlocutors, especially in the areas of social liveability and integration. This concerns children, for instance, who in a particular neighbourhood are forced to leave day-care because the quota for the number of children with a migration background has already been reached. They then have to go to day-care in another neighbourhood, with which their family feels no or little bond. While the goal of reaching a quatum has been attained at a macro level, the implications for the individual daily life of citizens do not play any part in the assessment of such results. Does this physical relocation of people and buildings really lead to an improved integration, liveability and safety? This is an important reason for the scepticism with which local officials look at the national legislation.

When we hold the local policy in Aarhus to the light, we see that the policy pursued in the vulnerable neighbourhood of *Gellerup* has served as an example for the development of national policy associated with the Ghetto legislation. Before the definitive act came into force at the national level, according to those involved, a sound and fruitful cooperation existed between the municipality and housing corporations in Aarhus. The stricter legislation regarding the five themes has caused the relationship to deteriorate, since the policies formerly used to improve the liveability, integration and safety were determined more organically by various professionals at work in the neighbourhood. As of November 2018, the new legislation has disrupted this organic process of cooperation. Although *Gellerup* previously seemed to be on its way to success by getting off the 'hard ghetto' list, nowadays the goals have still not been achieved, despite investments in the neighbourhood worth 1,3 billion euro.



Officials working at the local level in Aarhus now have put together a local ghetto list of their own, based on overlapping and mostly additional criteria for the identification of vulnerable neighbourhoods. One additional criterion is, for instance, the public health of inhabitants at neighbourhood level. In policy practice, there is little or no room for the pursuit of a preventative policy that can keep neighbourhoods from being placed on the ghetto list. Maybe the funding system might work as a perverse stimulus for the ghetto list because only these designated neighbourhoods receive extra funding. Aarhus municipality will publish *The Categorizing Model 2019* in the fall of 2019, which presents room for other criteria than those of the Ghetto legislation; it also pays more attention to preventative policy regarding vulnerable neighbourhoods. At this moment, the question is how the national level will respond to this new policy model of Aarhus.

## 2.5 Interaction between national and local policy for vulnerable neighbourhoods

### Persistent problems

The description of the countries and neighbourhoods shows, first of all, that the problem of vulnerable neighbourhoods has drawn the attention in all three countries. Those problems vary considerably for each neighbourhood, but they are persistent. An example is Marxloh in Duisburg. This neighbourhood has been the cradle for the emergence of the present approach in Germany at the end of the Nineties, yet it has never managed to get off the list of vulnerable neighbourhoods. Nowadays, the influx of Eastern Europeans generates a very different picture than what may be presumed from the name 'Little Istanbul'. Issues with education and crime have become more important than trouble in the street. Another example is Gellerup. The approach there seemed

to be successful, but although investments ran up to 1,3 billion euro, the goals for the neighbourhood have still not been achieved.

### Definition of a vulnerable neighbourhood

While the persistence of the problems in vulnerable neighbourhoods is evident, the three countries we have explored all use their own definition of what a vulnerable neighbourhood is. In one country the definition is more concrete than in the other. In Belgium, a vulnerable neighbourhood is a neighbourhood with challenges regarding the income level, participation in the labour market and origin of its inhabitants. In Berlin, a vulnerable neighbourhood is defined as a neighbourhood with much (prolonged) unemployment, (child) poverty and dependence on benefits. The Danish Ghetto Plan uses the most detailed definition of types of vulnerable neighbourhoods. A neighbourhood is defined as vulnerable when at least two of the following four criteria are met:

- The share of 18- to 64-year-old inhabitants who are not connected to either the labour market or the educational system was bigger than the average of 40% during the past two years.
- The share of inhabitants who have been convicted for a violation of the Penal Code, the Weapons Act or the Act on Euphorising Substances has risen to at least three times the national average, when calculated as the average over the last two years.
- The share of 30- to 59-year-old inhabitants with only a basic education is greater than 60% of all inhabitants in the same age group.
- The average gross income of inhabitants aged 16-64 (not including students in higher education) is less than 55% of the average gross income of the same age group in the region.

A vulnerable neighbourhood is a 'ghetto' when a neighbourhood has at least a thousand inhabitants among whom the share of immigrants and descendants with a non-western background is greater than 50%. A vulnerable neighbourhood is a 'hard ghetto' when it has been on the ghetto list for four consecutive years (this is five consecutive years for the 2018-2020 period).

### Fear of parallel societies

A topic that seems to take central stage in the social and political debate on vulnerable neighbourhoods, at least in Belgium and Denmark, is the fear of the emergence of parallel societies. Especially in Denmark, changes in the housing stock and an increase in the number of services in the vulnerable neighbourhoods are used to draw more inhabitants to these neighbourhoods with more social and economic capital. The question remains whether the large-scale physical interventions will really solve the socio-economic challenges faced by the inhabitants of vulnerable neighbourhoods, or that this is merely a way of making the 'statistics' in these neighbourhoods look better.

### Central or decentral

We have also noticed that in all three countries, the national level is important for the measures taken in vulnerable neighbourhoods. In this respect, Denmark pursues the most steering policy at its national level. At the local level, since 2018 this has resulted in a decrease in the freedom experienced by officials to make their own assessments. By contrast, Belgium is characterised by a far-reaching freedom for municipalities to pursue their own policy. Neither the Flemish regional level nor the Belgian federal level have a policy specifically focused on dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods. For this reason, a Belgian mayor can make a clear difference as a *change* agent. In between these

two positions, Germany is acting through a range of programmes entirely or partly applicable to the problems of vulnerable neighbourhoods. With their abstract goals, the national programmes have been set up in such a way that each administrative level can exert its influence through its own interpretation. Eventually, this all comes together in a biennial, integral plan for the neighbourhood.

### Sectoral or integral

Although Belgium lacks a national approach to vulnerable neighbourhoods, this does not mean that there is no response to the issues that are actual in these neighbourhoods. This response is rather sectoral in nature. From within every policy sector it is possible to pay attention to the problems in vulnerable neighbourhoods. The task of thinking integrally, based on the neighbourhoods in question, and of making an active connection between the different logics of the policy sectors, subsequently falls to the municipality. We have seen that, in this respect, the municipality of Mechelen takes a more active stance than Molenbeek. In Germany, despite the availability of budgets for taking integral measures in the neighbourhood, the separate policy sectors (for education, employment, safety) are ultimately most important in making a real difference in the neighbourhood. The Danish approach is the most integral one, since the problems in vulnerable neighbourhoods really are central to the national approach. Yet, there too, adjoining policy domains play an important role locally. Aarhus, for instance, publishes its own list of indicators, which also determines its public health policy.

### Budgets

The extensive approach in Denmark is linked to goals accompanied by a substantial budget of more than a billion euro. In Belgium, separate budgets are almost completely

lacking; relatively scarce possibilities of subsidy grants of at most dozens of millions are knitted together. Nevertheless, the idea is that these small budgets may have a leverage effect. In Germany, for each programme different and considerable budgets of hundreds of millions are available. The programmes are defined by various policy domains. In principle, it is possible for each separate neighbourhood to start up and implement a whole range of specific measures, based on a problem definition defined in the neighbourhood itself. In practice, the people involved respond with enthusiasm to the idea behind this, but they sense the danger of too much bureaucracy.

### Cooperation

The descriptions show that a neighbourhood-based approach requires cooperation between a great number of parties from a variety of sectors. Besides safety, integration & society and liveability, these parties may also include, for instance, educational policy, public health policy, labour market policy and youth policy.

Cooperation between all parties involved in a neighbourhood is enforced more effectively in the Danish situation than it is in Germany or Belgium. Providing steering toward a more integral cooperation in a national approach may encourage this. Precondition for a successful national approach is, however, that those involved at the local level experience national steering as useful. In Denmark, for example, there is doubt at the local level about the effectiveness of the national approach regarding social liveability and integration. In Belgium and Germany, fruitful cooperation is seen as an issue on which much energy is spent. When this effort is unsuccessful, it is a source of frustration but when it works, it is seen as the foundation for success. The Belgians consider their dovetailing of preventative and repressive approaches, for instance, to be an important factor for success in improving the safety in vulnerable neighbourhoods. In Germany,

those involved in the implementation level ask for more personal room to manoeuvre, in particular to improve the cooperation on location, within the neighbourhoods.

### Transmission from national to local policy

Our exploration in the three countries of the ways of dealing with vulnerable neighbourhoods has shown that the transmission from national policy to local practice may take on different forms. In Denmark, the existence of a national programme has proved to be an important trigger for municipalities to step up their focus on the improvement of vulnerable neighbourhoods. Although we have observed several problematic side effects of the Ghetto legislation in Denmark, we have found increased action at the local level as a positive effect.

Another part of a national programme is a definition of when a neighbourhood is vulnerable. Those involved in Denmark, however, ask for sensitivity regarding specific characteristics of each borough, and sometimes also of specific neighbourhoods within that area. A national policy, after all, is based on the assumption of a uniform approach, while the neighbourhoods differ considerably. Examples of negative side effects of a national programme are:

- That the neighbourhoods considered 'vulnerable' are burdened with a negative image, which makes the inhabitants feel excluded and makes people with more social and economic capital refrain from settling there.
- That the one-sided emphasis on the most vulnerable neighbourhoods gives rise to the danger that other neighbourhoods deteriorate.
- That figures on safety and socioeconomic status sometimes provide a distorted picture of reality, which gives rise to the question whether they should be decisive

for the vulnerable neighbourhoods in which investments are made. Sometimes, more qualitative information gathered at the local level provides a more correct picture of the neighbourhood.

The German model provides more room for setting up local plans within the national framework. This model also provides criteria for the granting of extra funds, which generates side effects similar to the Danish policy, such as stigmatisation and maybe an injudicious choice of the neighbourhoods that need to be dealt with. There are also concerns with respect to the specific implementation. The implementation is meant to facilitate quick and flexible action, to keep away from a system based on too many bureaucratic requirements, and to make cooperation possible with adjoining policy fields organised per sector.

When there is no specific policy on disadvantaged neighbourhoods, similar to the situation in Belgium, there is no discussion about the stigmatisation of the neighbourhoods involved. Nor will the determination of which neighbourhood is granted additional financial resources ever be an issue. Because problems in the neighbourhoods are dealt with by means of sectoral subsidies, those involved in this practice miss an overall vision. A danger is that a 'project carousel' will develop, funded by temporary subsidies. In both of our Belgian cases, we see indications that an integral vision is helpful, in steering sectoral policy as well as in its successful deployment for integration and safety in neighbourhoods.

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Deze verkenning geeft inzicht in de maatregelen die in België, Duitsland en Denemarken worden genomen om in kwetsbare wijken de veiligheid en leefbaarheid te verbeteren. De problematiek is hardnekkig, verschilt behoorlijk per wijk en heeft aandacht in alle drie de landen. Denemarken voert het meest sturende beleid op nationaal niveau. België kenmerkt zich door een grote vrijheid aan gemeenten om eigen beleid te voeren. Daartussenin beweegt zich Duitsland met programma's die geheel of gedeeltelijk beschikbaar zijn om de problematiek in kwetsbare wijken tegen te gaan. De beschrijvingen laten zien dat in een wijkaanpak samenwerking tussen een grote hoeveelheid aan partijen uit diverse sectoren noodzakelijk is. De aanwezigheid van een landelijk programma als in Denemarken is voor gemeenten een belangrijke trigger om gericht te werken aan de verbetering van kwetsbare wijken. Het Duitse model heeft als voordeel dat het ruimte biedt om lokaal eigen plannen op te stellen. Beide Belgische cases laten zien dat een integrale visie behulpzaam kan zijn om sectoraal beleid te sturen en succesvol in te zetten op integratie en veiligheid in de wijk.